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ABSTRACT

Educators must be sensitive to the ways in which their (and other's) passionate intensity can negatively affect the educational process. All of the human components of the educational system (students, teachers, and administrators) are involved in matters that frequently expose the trait of passionate intensity. A positive example is the excitement of learning and exploring with an emotional involvement that is productive, rewarding, and fun. However, several educational issues evoke emotional responses: collective bargaining, teacher unions, competency testing, federal intervention, mainstreaming, and accountability. Intense specialization within a discipline can produce pedantic zealots. Therefore, educators must be reminded that they may be contributing to a repressive atmosphere in their adherence to ideology or zeal for achievement. If the traits of openness, independence, creativity, compassion, thoughtfulness, and flexibility are not fostered, then society is subject to the influence of passionate intensity such as Germany was under Nazi leadership. Educators must recognize the obligation to approach their problems with diligence. A modest, steadfast approach adds stability to a process that frequently strays toward emotional appeals. (Author/KC)

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Passionate Intensity As A Disruptive Element In The Educational Process

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Abstract

This essay attempts to define the concept of passionate intensity and explain how it can affect the educational process. It is suggested that everyone is subject to emotional involvements that may hinder the goals of an educated society. Since educators are subject to being diverted in some way by a passionate intensity, they must be sensitive to these potential problems that can influence our society. A concern is expressed that our educational efficiency may have many hidden problems related to emotional fixations (i.e., passionate intensity) by leadership.

Passionate Intensity As A Disruptive Element In The Educational Process

A state of passionate intensity is frequently associated with personal emotions. One's emotional drive may be represented by the concept of passionate intensity in some dynamic way. Hysterical crying, throwing a fit, or having a temper tantrum are extreme examples of visible emotional releases. An emotional fixation directs a person's attention into narrow channels of thought. When this happens, often in subtle ways, the educational process is being restricted.

Educators attempt to control emotional involvement by demanding or soliciting an objective approach. Professionals are told to be objective in order to be more effective. A reasoned approach is thought to be helpful in keeping one beyond emotional entanglements. This is also supposed to keep people stable and in good mental health so their life's work will flourish.

People who express a passionate interest are usually committed or involved in a way that suggests emotional involvement. Often the words passionate intensity are associated with the act of showing affection or displaying emotions in an amorous way. It may not seem logical to associate educational matters with the concept of passionate intensity, but this connection can help to define many problems educators face. The emotional element is an influential force in society, because it is an inherent human

quality subject to unpredictable moods. Emotional stability is considered to be a key ingredient required of civilized exchanges. The concepts of reason and tolerance attempt to control emotional displays.

On a daily basis all of the significant human components of our educational system (students, teachers, and administrators) are involved with matters that frequently expose the trait of passionate intensity. Students become intense and serious about school related activity; teachers get emotionally involved with students and their subject matter in many ways; administrators have a multitude of emotional problems that challenge them to be calm and reasonable when handling delicate human concerns. These aspects of the educational process usually do not receive much attention, because they are viewed as common problems within the human condition. Educational concerns related to budget, curriculum changes, and policy issues are frequently the topics that receive attention. These matters are sometimes called substantive issues.

There are numerous instances when a state of passionate intensity, or more precisely extreme emotional involvement, becomes part of the educational process. Educators understand the excitement of learning and exploring with a passionate intensity. This type of emotional involvement can be rewarding and fun. Productivity may be the result of a passionate intensity to excel. Indeed, emotional intensity may be a hidden factor within the concept of motivation.

In another way passionate intensity can be a negative aspect of our human experience. Eric Hoffer said, "Faith, enthusiasm, and passionate intensity in general are substitutes for the self-confidence born of experience and the possession of skill. Where there is the necessary skill to move mountains there is no need for the faith that moves mountains."[1] This observation by Hoffer, a tough minded social critic and earthy philosopher, may not be completely acceptable to those with idealistic visions. Experience and skill tends to build a positive self-image that promotes confidence. The emotionalism displayed by a passionate intensity may indeed be a substitute for experience and skill. The concept of maturity is probably developed along with experience and skill.

Educational problems can be exacerbated by the inimical passionate intensity of hate, malice, and vengeance. There are a multitude of educational issues that evoke emotional responses (i.e., collective bargaining, teacher unions, competency testing, federal intervention, mainstreaming, and accountability). Racial integration in the schools frequently exposed the ugly side of passionate intensity primarily through the emotions of parents. Within the realm of education, subject matter specialists often get carried away in the pursuit of truth and attempt to inflict their jaundice view of the world on others. This behavior may be isolated and infrequent, but it does happen. Intense specialization within the disciplines has produced some pedantic zealots. The classic controversy between rigid behavioralism and soft, affective approaches can produce considerable emotional friction.

It is possible to visualize a heated exchange between the fictional characters Dr. Strangelove and Mr. Chips concerning educational policy. Specialists within the disciplines sometimes become crusaders for a particular cause and engage in academic politics with a subtle form of passionate intensity.

Academic discussion regarding truth must be moderated with reason and thoughtful behavior in classrooms, laboratories, faculty meetings, and through national forums. A passionate intensity can provide some spark and zeal, but educators at all levels need to be aware of their limitations when under the influence of emotional inebriation. One may be consumed with a passionate intensity and at the same time unaware of the consequences. "There is always a measure of choice in our manner of perception, and whenever we see something in one way we cannot see it at the same time in a different way."[2] Educators are as guilty of wearing the blinders of their profession as anyone else. A passionate intensity may at times be substituted for perspicacity. Obsession caused by emotional involvement is a professional and personal hazard for all humans.

The entire system of education needs some measure of emotional commitment to breathe life into a difficult and sometimes painful process. However, being aware of our human faults while functioning as student, teacher or administrator is not an easy task. It may be impossible to keep one's emotions in balance at all times, but rational people usually make an attempt to be composed when dealing with important, emotionally charged issues. The linkage

between an emotional fixation and a social responsibility like education must constantly be reviewed and put into a perspective for the future. This means that we should look beyond a provincial atmosphere that may be charged with emotional blocks. Institutions are constructed and managed by humans who at times can be self-serving and manipulative with a passionate intensity. This happens in education as well as government and business. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents are involved.

It is healthy for educators to draw back and review their efforts occasionally. Taking time to read, discuss, reflect, and devote some thought to scope and purpose can be a self-renewal process that may check or mediate emotional involvement. It has been said that our freedom is the product of reflection.[3]

> Genuine freedom, in short, is intellectual; it rests in the trained power of thought, in ability to "turn things over," to look at matters deliberately, to judge whether the amount and kind of evidence requisite for decision is at hand, and if not, to tell where and how to seek such evidence. If a man's actions are not guided by thoughtful conclusions, then they are guided by inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appetite, caprice, or the circumstances of the moment. To cultivate unhindered, unreflective external activity is to foster enslavement, for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite, sense, and circumstance.[4]

Professionals who continuously function with a passionate intensity are capable of dominating the educational process and subverting it. The questioning spirit can be suppressed in an environment infused with emotional dogma. The spectacular Scopes trial in 1925 at Dayton, Tennessee engaged the interest of the entire nation and contributed to an emotional issue within

education. (John T. Scopes was arrested, because he lectured to a high school class from a Darwinian text.) Educators have to be reminded they may be contributing to a repressive atmosphere in their adherence to ideology or zeal for achievement. This can happen in a classroom or in a faculty meeting. Sometimes it occurs in a spontaneous manner with thoughtless malice. As students, teachers, or administrators working within the educational process, we are exposed to human faults that create obstacles.

On another level passionate intensity can influence national policy. When this happens the educational community in a sense has failed. If graduates do not foster the general traits of openness, independence, creativity, compassion, thoughtfulness, and flexibility, then society is vulnerable to the influence of passionate intensity. When the ones who are identified as being educated conduct self-serving, emotional tirades in the name of national goals, the world community suffers. Germany under the Nazis and Japan under a military caste system were among the most well-schooled people in the world. Their leadership was driven by a passionate intensity for power, and this desire was passed on to the populace through a shallow, simplistic rhetoric with sophisticated methods. An educated country is responsible for their leaders' behavior. Leadership that is dedicated to the acquisition of power is often consumed by a calculating and devious passionate intensity. One might say this is just a human characteristic that cannot be adequately controlled, but our system of education should not dismiss its responsibility with

such an observation. The quality of our educational system is reflected by our leaders. Educators are representatives of the civilized world, and they must stand for something in the way of values. Freedom, integrity, aesthetic relations, and understanding are concepts to be transmitted along with discipline and subject knowledge. There is concern as to how this should be done, and often a state of passionate intensity takes over by blocking a moderate, reasoned approach. This is a complex social process that is difficult to completely understand. Events such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal are extreme examples of indiscretions committed in a complicated series by so-called educated people. (It may be quite an understatement to say indiscretions in place of deceit or manipulation.)

A state of passionate intensity can influence events, although it may be difficult to convince the public this happens. Public reactions can contribute to a state of passionate intensity, because many times the public cannot find out what is happening. We can be deceived and confused. Bureaucratic webs are difficult to trace within institutional settings. Clever people are able to hide within different kinds of bureaucracies and conduct themselves with an intense emotional drive. Human characteristics are responsible for events without too much visibility in large organizations. Has it ever happened that a vindicative superintendent caused a teacher to be dismissed for personal reasons related to spite or vanity? Have teachers ever driven students to dispair and perhaps suicide because of their callous approach or perverted emotional

intensity? Most certainly those events happen within a system that is committed to an enlightened approach. Often these serious encroachments are never exposed. The invisible "system" is thought to be at fault. Yet, it is people who make the "system".

It is difficult to convince the public that our system of education indirectly determines the way our society maintains a particular set of values. If we have cheats and narrow-minded, unscrupulous people of various sorts influencing the educational system, then we are more likely to produce these people in society. Serious educators are concerned with the devious human element at all levels of education. Many problems that educators must cope with are those related to passionate intensity --- human emotional problems. A major thrust within the educational system is to promote self-discipline and respect for others in the world community. Too often our discipline and respect either breaks down or becomes a self-serving means under the pressure to succeed at a particular task. This is a serious and most difficult matter for educators to control.

One important reason for concern is that many people consider our educational system to be quite efficient and humane. People also tend to see the educational system as something separate from what takes place on the national or international level. Taking this perspective it is then logical to say that educators should not be too concerned with irresponsible leadership. However, it is difficult to explain how Vietnam and Watergate (symbols of inefficiency, corruption and inhumanity) can happen to an

educated society. Educators have been most efficient in producing scientific talent during a 20-year period from the late 1950's through the 1970's. We have a sophisticated system that attempts to educate or train everyone for a career of some kind. Efficiency and sophistication may not be serving us well. Our technical and technicist efforts to raise the level of literacy are likely to be of little avail.[5] People in leadership positions now have greater influence with efficient and sophisticated means, but the process of education is also concerned with how we use our knowledge. Our private passions and personal purposes may impose a serious threat to the world community.

An institutional inertia can sweep people off their feet with the use of passionate intensity. Educators concerned with the temper of our times recognize the obligation to approach their problems with diligence. The modest, steadfast path adds a dimension of stability to a process that frequently strays toward emotional appeals.

NOTES

1. Eric Hoffer, The Ordeal of Change (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), p. 4.

2. Michael Polanyi, The Logic of Liberty (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 15.

3. J. Alexander Gunn, Modern French Philosophy (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1922).

4. John Dewey, How We Think (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1933), p. 90.

5. Maxine Greene, "Liberal Education and the Newcomber." Phi Delta Kappa 60(9) May 1979.